

First Congregational UCC, Appleton

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Ephesians 6:10-20, "Fighting Words"

A few years ago, my brother-in-law Matt retired from the US Air Force after a long and honorable career. He was an excellent officer who was entrusted with significant responsibilities and awarded several medals throughout the duration of his service. But you know how families are. Families are immensely proud of the accomplishments but love to tell the stories of the foibles. Especially in my family, which is fluent in the love language of teasing. I particularly appreciate the story of when Matt was hard at work in his office on base, sorting classified files for all I know, when he began absentmindedly singing. Sweet, right? But what makes this story worthy of retelling at the family reunions is that this happened in 2003, when the song "Milkshake" by Kellis was at the top of the charts. My brother-in-law had its provocative, ambiguous, and dangerously catchy refrain in his head. If you know you know. Furthermore, he was not alone. Unbeknownst to him, a fellow officer had just stepped into the doorway. Apparently, the officer laughed so hard he couldn't breathe.

To be clear, this anecdote has absolutely nothing to do with the gospel today, I just really enjoy telling that story.

The other one that gets brought up to Matt's chagrin happened during his years in the Pentagon. He tripped on the escalator and all of his belongings spilled out onto the metal stairs. There arose such a clatter that the busy and bustling military complex came to a complete halt as security guards came rushing to respond to what they assumed was gunfire.

As my sister tells it, there were only twenty thousand witnesses to the debacle. For me, reading this passage from Paul's letter to the Ephesians is something like that spectacle on the Pentagon escalator. There are some very clear tripping hazards. There is some truly ear-splitting noise. And there is the danger of mistaking something for what it is not.

Before we can receive the good news at the heart of this passage, we have to acknowledge the complications to our capacity to listen and understand it. Paul

made a bold choice to use militaristic metaphors. He borrowed imagery from the Roman infantry.

It's hard to make sense of this. Jesus called peacemakers blessed children of God. Jesus was crucified by the hands of Roman soldiers. I'll be perfectly honest with you: once upon the time this passage made me deeply uncomfortable. I have always had an impulse toward pacifism. How do we reconcile the way of Jesus with the way of violence? My brother-in-law and I used to have some friendly but noisy debates at family dinners. He would speak pragmatically about nuclear deterrence; I would rail passionately about nonviolent resistance. My mother would break it up by offering second helpings of dessert.

Of course, it matters that Paul penned the letter to the Ephesians in a specific context. He wrote from prison to a community of Christians that was subject to violent persecution. They were, to the naked eye, utterly powerless against their enemies. As Paul exalted God's might, he did so while addressing the vulnerable. As Paul pondered God's strength, he did so while speaking to the weak. The early Christians were an underdog receiving a pep talk from an ambassador in chains.

But we can't help but hear this passage in light of history. Apologies for the mixed metaphor, but the light of history is incredibly loud.

Christians did not remain the underdog. Constantine plastered an early symbol for Christ on the armor of his soldiers. Christians waged so-called Holy Wars during the medieval Crusades. And as recently as January 6, 2021, violence exploded at the Capitol under banners proclaiming the name of Jesus. To say that Christians have taken the "whole armor of God" metaphor in directions that are antithetical to the gospel is a gross understatement. The profound disconnect between the teachings of Jesus and the behavior of his followers is one of the catalysts for the decline of religious faith and practice. "I like your Christ," said Gandhi. "I do not like your Christians."

But there's still more clanging in the pandemonium that makes it hard for us to listen and understand. The uncomfortable contours of biblical cosmology cannot be ignored in this passage. We live in a disenchanting era that has precious little patience for a worldview that includes a wily devil. It's easy to stumble over

a text that presumes the existence of cosmic powers and spiritual forces of evil. This talk of spiritual warfare can pour gasoline on the fire of human tribalism and bloodlust. Our enemies aren't just our enemies; they are the enemies of God, agents of evil.

The baggage is spilling in every which way, and it is deafening. But. Once the din of distortions dies down, the clanging of connotations subsides, the ruckus of reservations comes to an end – perhaps we will find blessed quiet after the storm. Space to think, a moment to listen again to the words beneath the noise. If we are patient and attentive, we will hear the Spirit uttering the good news of the gospel.

*Take up the whole armor of God*, Paul says, and it is an armor so unlike a Roman Centurion I can almost hear Paul giggling as he concocted the analogy. To followers of Jesus, Paul issues a belt of truth, a breastplate of righteousness, shoes for proclaiming peace, a shield of faith, a helmet of salvation, and a sword that is no weapon of war but the grace-filled word of God. Do not imagine a fearsome warrior. Imagine a child outfitted in her father's size thirteen shoes, holding a shield she can barely lift. Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power, Paul implores. This is not about our strength and power. This is about God's strength and power. And Jesus has shown up precisely what God's strength and power is. It is not the strength of domination. It is not the power of force.

The sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, reveals a God willing to die to save us. God is not violent. God is love. Richard Rohr names the profound significance of this revelation: "If God and Jesus are not violent or vindictive, then our excuse for the same is forever taken away from us. If God is punitive and torturing, then we have permission to do the same. Thus, grew much of the church's violent history."

The sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, testifies that there is indeed a savage and diabolical evil at work, even if we think we are too sophisticated for such silly superstitions. "There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils," writes CS. Lewis. "One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors

and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.” Let us not delight the devil. Let us respect the enormity of the sin and brokenness that pervades God’s beloved creation – even as we trust that the spiritual forces of evil are no match for the spiritual force of the Triune God.

The sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, announces a scandalous and beautiful gospel. Francis Spufford calls this gospel a “a song of liberation, a startling declaration that power, that love, that justice, that order, that God the creator of all things, weren’t what we thought they were, but came closest to us in paradoxes. Wisdom, in foolishness; strength, in weakness; sovereignty over the immense empire of matter, in helpless self-sacrifice, in a choking man brought to death by a shrugging government... Spufford continues, recalling particularly unexpected teachings of Jesus. ‘Greater love hath no man than this than that he lay down his life for his friend...’ Not very positive, is it? ‘Love your [enemy] and pray for those who persecute you.’ What’s that about? How will that help me to be thinner, richer, stronger, more... successful? It won’t,” Spufford continues. “It will only help you to be kinder, braver, more tolerant of our inevitable imperfections, and more hopeful more convinced that the worst that can happen to us, as humans, is not the last word, because there is a love we should try to copy in our small ways, which never rests, never gives up, is never defeated.”

This is the scandalous and beautiful gospel we are called to stand on, as we prevail against all that would deceive, as we resist all that would oppress, as we stand firm against all that would divide. Thank God we don’t have to do it alone. Thank God it doesn’t depend on our feeble efforts and inconsistent intentions. To extend the metaphor, the battle has already been won. Once and for all. So we stand and pray. Pray and stand. Maybe we even hum a song of liberation as we retie our shoes and fidget with our shields. In the fullness of time, that song of liberation will supersede all sound.

The powers and principalities have nothing on the Prince of Peace. The present darkness cannot conquer the light of the world. The mystery of the gospel resounds. May it be so. Amen.